

THE STING

ANATOMY OF A SET-UP

Sgt. James Topham

Can the famous 'confidence game', in its many shades and hues, played the world over by con-artists, be played in prison too? You bet it can! Read how corrections employees can put themselves in a compromising situation and not realize it until the trap has been sprung and it's too late. This author spells out the warning signs in the 14 steps of a set-up. You'll want to clip-and-save this one for certain.

Those of us that have been in corrections for any period of time know that we can have all the use of force training, defensive tactics, report writing, and first aid training in the world and it will not prepare us for the inmate set-up. We have all heard the stories of the officers that have become victims of inmate manipulation and, what's known as "the set-up" and it makes us wonder how and why it happens?

For the most part we have lived our lives—prior to entering this field—in towns and cities surrounded by our friends and by neighbors that we trusted and could rely on in our daily routines. We tended to give people the benefit of the doubt, and paid little attention to the idea that someone would deceive us. Becoming familiar

with the saying "a man's word is his bond," we may have come to expect and accept that philosophy as binding. But when we became educated as correctional employees, that all changed.

There are inmates who know almost instinctively how to manipulate the will of another person because coercion has, in many cases, become a lifestyle.

Over the years of committing crimes, being arrested, and incarcerated, some of these inmates have honed their skills. They have developed intricate and sophisticated systems of deception, often times for no other reason than the pleasure it provides them.

The system of deception they have created is called the set-up. The set-up is a game.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines a game as any form of play, amusement, or sport involving competition under rules. There is a winner and a loser. The winner, in the case of a successful set-up, receives rewards and the loser pays the consequences. The inmate can receive illegal contraband, sex, status among peers, and the personal satisfaction from just being able to do it.

The loser's rewards are less glamorous. They can be terminated from their employment, face criminal charges, and in some cases, face death.

In reviewing the steps of behavioral manipulation designed to show how inmates implement a set-up it should be understood that this process does not always develop in the same order, but all the elements will usually be utilized regardless of the procedure the inmate employs. The average set-up takes approximately 19 months to be successful. It is a slow process because it is very subtle.

And because they are applied subtly, set-ups can go on in full view of employee's peers, supervisors, and administrators without being recognized. However, depending on the victim's susceptibility level, set-ups can occur in just weeks. To understand the set-up one must realize how manipulation works.

Manipulation

Manipulation means to control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage. To change by artful or unfair means so as to serve one's purpose.

With that in mind, here is a review of manipulative tactics that can be used by inmates:

- Flattery: to stroke the ego.
- Empathy: to identify without feeling sorry. "I can relate to that."
- Sympathy: to feel sorry for them.
- Helplessness: beware the inmate asking for help.
- Sensitivity: to you as a person.
- Confidentiality: to share a "secret" or create a bond.
- Isolate and protect: use of rumors; playing staff against staff.
- Touching: implies permission to proceed further.
- Sexual references: is always unacceptable whether by staff or inmates.
- Coercion and intimidation: usually in the form of blackmail.

Staff susceptibility can go along with inmate manipulation tactics. The susceptibility factors that can affect staff include:

- Environmental/societal conditioning.
(Attractive, polite inmate; or same age, race, religion, background as the corrections employee.)
- Sexual attraction.
(Especially if the employee is supervising members of the opposite sex.)
- Power and control.
(Used by staff who think they should punish inmates. This gives inmates a powerful motive to "get" the staff.)

Manipulation is accomplished on an individual victim basis. Victims are selected because of their personality traits.

Inmates use the traits of the potential victim that most would see as good. A corrections employee's education, years of experience, rank, sex, ethnicity, and intellect are not protectors. Any trait possessed by the target officer that certain inmates can construe as a weakness can result in that individual being selected as a victim in a set-up.

Corrections employees, as well as inmates, place officers and staff in basically three categories: soft, medium, and hard. (In most lesson plans they use the word *mellow*. I find the word *mellow* is too close to soft and has a connotation about it, so for that reason I will use the word *medium*.)

Soft employees are usually very trusting, overly familiar, and naive. They may have a strong desire to help the inmate and be sympathetic and understanding. They have the inability to say "no" or take command.

Hard employees go strictly by the book. Everything is black and white and there is no in-between. They grant no leeway. This is often associated

with what we call the "macho syndrome".

Medium employees know how to use the traits of both the soft and hard categories at the appropriate times in the right manner.

Inmates will concentrate on the soft and hard employees. Soft because of the inability or hesitancy to say no combined with their understanding and sympathetic traits. Hard because inmates may feel that the hardness and the "by the book no exceptions attitude" disguises a weakness in that individual.

The medium employee that uses both traits at the appropriate times will usually be left alone. This is not because they can't be manipulated, but because the process would take too much time. Their actions will discourage the manipulative process. For example:

Soft=Gullible,
Medium=Cautious, Hard=Suspicious.

The 14 Steps

There are three processes in the set-up, techniques, tools, and turnouts. The first two processes—techniques and tools—are considered *the net* which is spread to catch the victim. In the final process—the turnout—the inmate receives *the payoff* for his or her patience and ability to manipulate the victim. It is not until this late stage that the individual will realize he has fallen victim to a set-up.

The three processes are made up of fourteen steps. The first three steps explain the inmate's method of operation. This is the technique stage. The next eight steps contain the tools they will use in the set-up. Here, an inmate's manipulation tactics and resources will be used to *turn* the employee. The final three steps culminate in the turnout. And these last steps are used to compromise the employee and advise them they are in real trouble.

Techniques

Step 1: Observation Process

An inmate does not just "pick a name out of a hat" for selection of a victim in a set-up. It is a very precise, close, silent study by the inmate to determine the likelihood of a victim. The target's movements, words, and actions in every aspect of the daily job supply a manipulator with information vital to the process.

The observer will watch and listen to a potential victim. Actions and ver-

balizations will help him theorize as to whether or not the person would be a good candidate for selection. The observer will pay close attention to an employee who uses inmate jargon, ignores minor rules violations, plays favorites, and is easily distracted.

An inmate will produce a staff personality profile to decide which employee may circumvent rules and regulations. Responses to seemingly harmless questions assist in the construction of this profile. This takes place over months. It is slow, subtle, and calculated.

Body language: the manner and method in which a person carries oneself gives off messages. The observer, watching the body language, wants to know if the individual has a lack of confidence, and is not sure in certain situations. The observer wants to know if fear can be instilled, and if the corrections employee portrays a like or dislike for the job.

These are only a few of the observations that will be made based on individual body language. The way the uniform is worn can transmit signals to the observer too. Inmates may assume, based on an individual's appearance of having unpressed clothing, unkempt personal hygiene, and an all-around sloppy look that they lack self-esteem and professionalism. This could add to the profile as selection for a victim becomes better defined.

Listening Observation: we all know, but sometimes forget, that inmates listen to everything we say and how we say it. Much information about the employee can be obtained just by listening. An inmate will listen to see if the employee likes or dislikes certain inmates. He will note hobbies and interests, and listen to how the corrections employee responds to supervisors and to peers. He will listen for personal information, such as home address; whether married, single, or divorced; and other seemingly harmless details.

Once the inmate finds out the individual's likes and dislike he then can adopt the same ones, even if this means studying up on certain subjects or finding another inmate with knowledge in that area of interest. When the employee next appears, the conversation will begin based on the employee's likes and dislikes in an attempt to form a different relationship between the employee and the inmate.

Up to this point the observation phase has probably been assisted by numerous inmates. Each one of them getting specific information a bit at a

time and then compiling all of the information gathered by the set-up team.

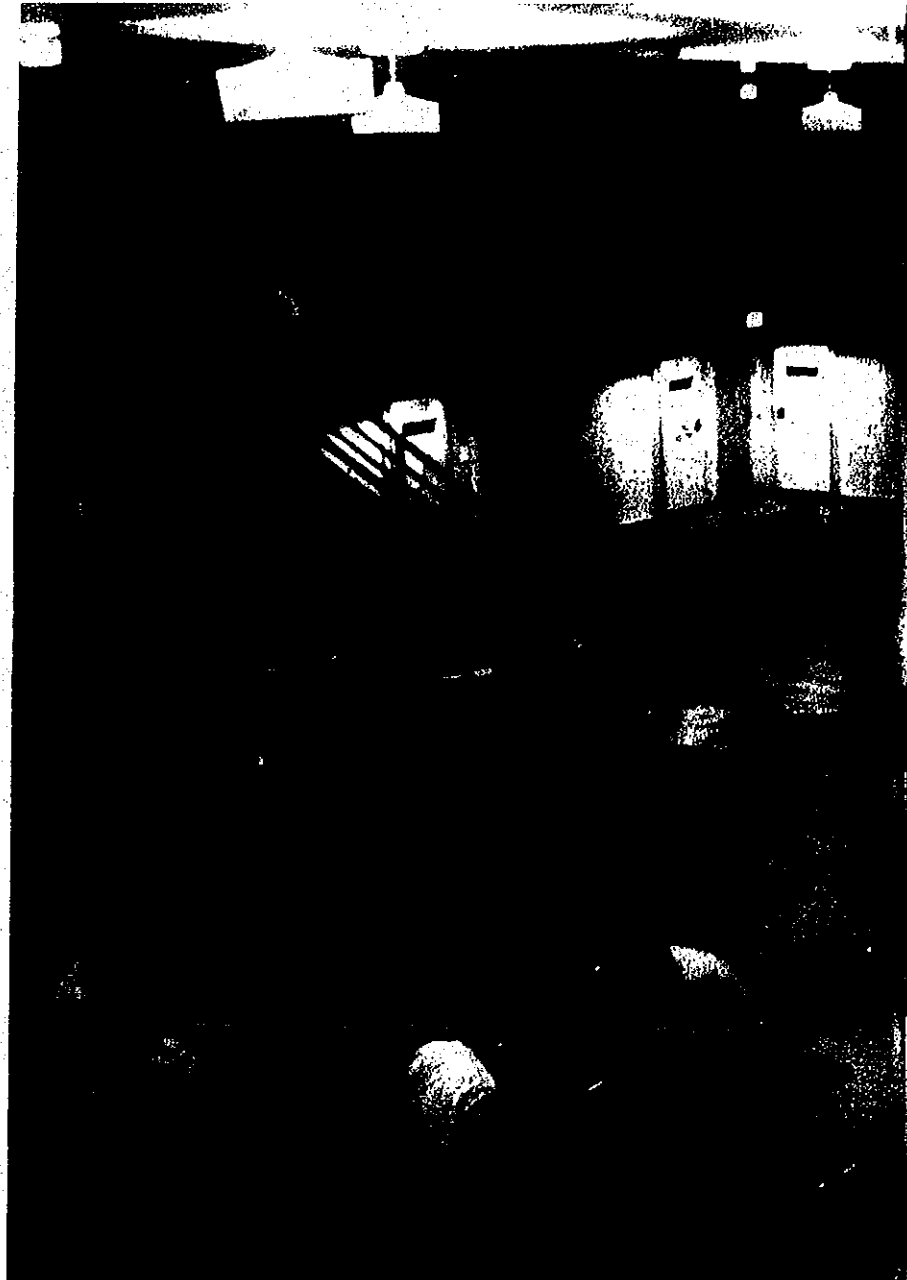
Verbal Observation: based on the employee profile a *turner* will be chosen from the inmates with the same likes, dislikes, and background as the employee. The *turner*, along with several other friendly inmates will confront the employee and thus the conversation will begin. Other inmates that accompany the *turner* are only there to see how the *turner* will be received by the employee.

Will the employee "befriend" the inmate?

The *turner* will begin to build a close bond with the staff member based on information from the employee personality profile. The *turner* will portray only good qualities that the employee respects and admires. The

turner will look for signs of approval or disapproval in the employee and if they are comfortable or uncomfortable with the topics of discussion. Both verbal and nonverbal responses from the victim to the manipulator will be noted and reviewed.

Action Observation: the *turner* will now violate a minor rule to test what sort of stand the employee will take. He will find out if the theory about the employee's reaction will be correct. The action involves some risk on the *turner's* part but the violation will be minor at first. The *turner* may even make a verbal suggestion that he or she may violate the rule or regulation to see what type of response the employee is going to give. If the employee ignores this subtle suggestion and looks the other way then the *turner* will act out the violation.





Step 2: Selection Of A Victim

Employees are selected as victims in two ways: accidentally and intentionally. Many potential victims have been selected and then tested against their employee personality profile. The inmates on the set-up team have to expend a lot of time and energy to turn an employee, so selection constitutes an important step. It is like shopping. They want to make sure they get the best return for their efforts. If the profile proves wrong, then usually that employee will be discarded as a target.

Any trait possessed by the employee that the team can construe as a weakness can result in that individual's selection as a victim of a set-up. Intentional selection will be based on the personality profile, employee traits, and all of the information gathered up

to this point. Accidental selection could come from the employee making an error in judgement that they would not normally make and the inmates becoming aware of it. This could be due to a job change, financial difficulty, or family-oriented problems. They do not necessarily have to be negative changes, they could be positive.

Step 3: Test The Limits/Fish Testing

Testing the limits is just that. This is called "nudging." The inmate will push, bend, and attempt to circumvent minor rules to determine how far he can go before the victim takes action, if at all.

Fish testing occurs when the turner requests minor items of contraband that the victim is not supposed to issue.

The inmate has put out the line and hook which is the request. The bait on the hook is the fact that the inmate has made the victim feel obligated due to the friendly relationship which has been cultivated. The hook is set when the victim gives the inmate the items that were requested.

The intent here is to see how much of—and how easily and how fast—these items can be obtained. It is not uncommon to have both of these tactics used on the same victim. Testing is slow and subtle and may go on for the entire process of the set up.

Tools

The tools of the set-up are found in steps 4-11. *(These steps will follow the typical sequence of their appearance in the set-up process. However they can proceed in any order, calculated to validate that individual.)*

Step 4: The Support System

This step is summed up as a development of togetherness and understanding. This begins subtly with both verbal and nonverbal support. Verbal support could be comments of support and understanding indirectly given to the victim through conversations with other inmates. This can be done in such a way so the victim will hear the comments of support. Later they will be given directly to the victim, i.e., "you're the best C.O. in the joint." The inmate will build the victim's ego.

Nonverbal will be subtle too, and at first could consist of being on time for work every day, going the "extra mile" for the victim without being asked, being enthusiastic about the work assignment, and always performing well with no common inmate complaints.

The inmate wants to create a feeling of making himself indispensable and if possible making the victim's job easier. Pledges of devotion and faith in the individual will help create a strong trusting friendship.

Step 5: Empathy/Sympathy

Empathy bases itself on a shared experience, attitude, thought, belief, and experience. The more areas encompassed by empathy the greater the bond will become between the victim and the inmate because of the shared experiences.

Even though these shared experiences may not have been acquired at the same time or with that person it creates an understanding and same-

ness. In empathy the inmate can identify and understand with the victim without feeling sorry or pity. "I have been there, I can relate to exactly how you are feeling."

Sympathy demonstrates a feeling without necessarily having shared the experience that created the feeling. Compassion for another's problems without having had the experience induces sympathy. The inmate may have the sameness in feeling but not in having shared the experience with the victim, thus sympathy can be added to the set-up through pity and compassion.

Step 6: Plea For Help

Let's face it, to say correctional work can be thankless is an understatement. It is rare to see the fruits of our labor and the occasional pat on the back. Because the victim rarely runs into a positive result from his work he is highly susceptible to this step.

In Plea for Help the saying "a friend in need is a friend indeed" is very true. A corrections employee wants to help and the inmates know this and can use it to their advantage.

The inmate is trying to build a you/me situation. Following the empathy and sympathy stage will be "you

are the only one that can help me." The inmate will draw the victim in using the need to help with: "I have been a failure my entire life," "I am such a waste," "please help!" Remember the employee's job is to help the inmates within the prescribed manner. That is the key, "within the prescribed manner." That does not mean keeping things confidential between the employee and the inmate.

Inmates will try to establish a strong you/me situation by using confidentiality. "I have to tell you something but do not tell anyone." There is nothing confidential between an employee and an inmate.

Step 7: We/They Syndrome

This step demonstrates perhaps the most subtle of the set-up steps and always pits one staff member against another. The inmates want to separate the victim from the rest of the staff so the victim will turn to them for ego support.

Inmates will tell the victim that they overheard staff talking down about the victim and that they can "understand." The inmates may tell the victim: "they treat you like us." They will build on the victim's ego with statements such

as: "they're wrong about you," and "they do not know you like I do."

If this will not work with the victim then the inmates on the team might go after other staff members about the person they are trying to set-up. This is an effort to conquer and divide. Dissension among ranks work. If the victim will not buy into the "team support system" then the inmates may go the opposite direction, trying to remove that victim from his support system.

If those two techniques do not work then there is another approach in the we/they syndrome, which is to dwell on a cause. Whatever position the victim takes about certain things then the inmates will take the same views. Inmates will support whatever position a susceptible employee takes such as race, background, religion, and prejudices.

Step 8: Offer Of Protection

Offers of protection can be minor or serious. With a minor offer it could be as simple as friendliness and trust to the inmate "taking the heat" for something he or she is requesting from the victim. An inmate can afford to get into trouble whereas employees cannot. By saying, "I'll take the heat," an inmate is offering protection, although minor.

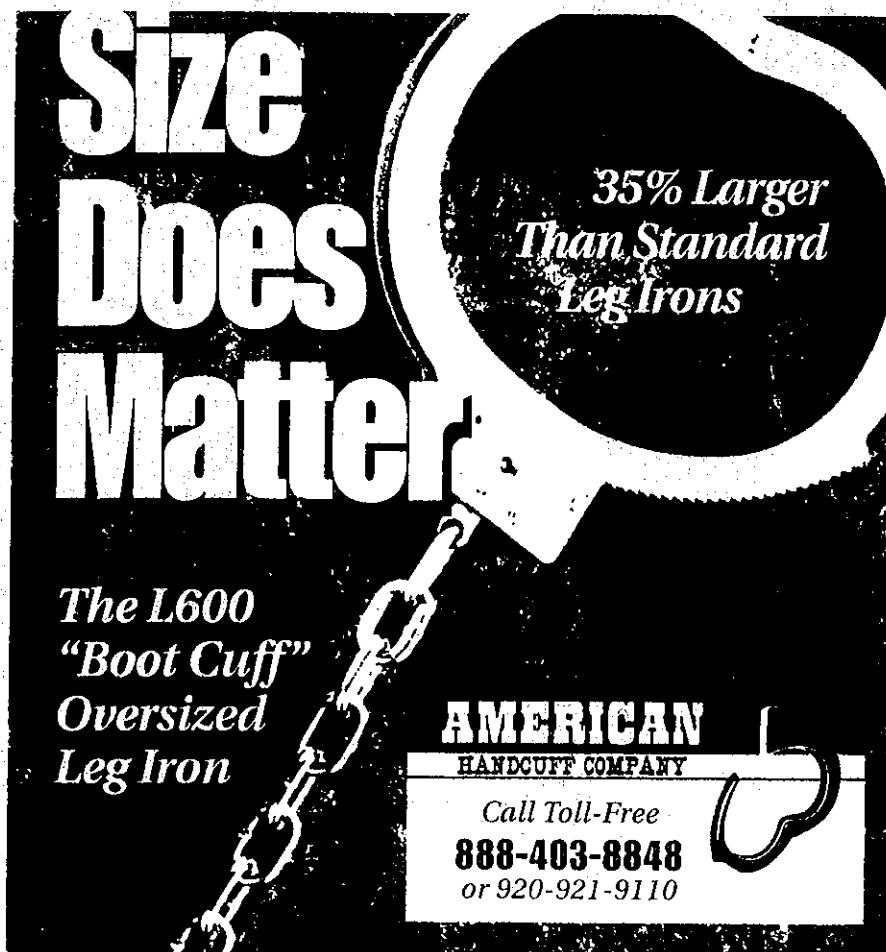
In the more serious offer of protection it could consist of the use of fear and staging an event. The inmate will offer information about areas of danger to the victim. The inmate will be reassuring that he would never let this happen to the victim.

If the victim does not appear to be overly concerned about the dangers then the set-up team may stage an event to demonstrate to the victim that the inmate or inmates will be there to "protect." This will take place when no other staff members are in the area to come to the aid of the victim. They want the victim to feel that his or her peers are not able to assist in times of trouble. This staged event is not to injure the victim but to make the victim grateful for the inmate's intervention. The friendship between the victim and the protector now becomes even stronger.

Step 9: Allusion To Sex

Controlling the urge for sex in corrections is an ongoing problem. When an inmate is attempting to manipulate a staff member in a set-up for sex, the situations and conditions must be carefully planned and implemented so as not to draw attention to the inmate.

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about a male or female staff member as a victim in Step 9. Much of the information seen in print today about this subject is directed toward the female employee. But a male corrections employee can become a victim to the Allusion To Sex just as easily as a female employee.

Manipulative inmates are not only males, the female inmates can be and have proven to be just as devious. The allusion to sex will come at any point in the set-up process that the inmate feels most comfortable. The inmate will approach the subject when they feel the friendship they have cultivated will tolerate it.

The comments may be directed at the employee but away from the inmate, such as claiming it was another inmate that made certain comments and that the inmate was sticking up for the employee. For example: "Last night while the women were sitting around talking, one of the girls said if it were not for being in prison she would have sex with you freely. I said you were not like that." The inmate will now wait to see what the staff member's response is going to be. This is going to determine the next step in the set-up process.

Even having no response could lead to the belief by the inmate that it is all right to have these types of conversations. If the inmate believes the victim is responding in a positive manner, the allusion to sex will become more direct involving the manipulator.

Step 10: The Touch System

Inmates will create a touching situation with both male and female employees. This does not necessarily have to be sexual in nature. For males it could be a handshake, pat on the back, or the placing of a hand on the shoulder. It is an attempt to create a more personable bond.

The touching of females may be less obvious, such as the flicking of dirt from the uniform, the straightening of the collar, or even a pat on the back. With both male and female employees it may seem like an accident such as bumping into the victim or brushing up against her. Even the accidental touching of a breast has proven to increase the personal bond. And the inmate will usually apologize profusely until the incident is forgotten.

But the touching will grow more and more frequent and prolonged as well as better timed to ensure that no other staff member is around. Also, the touching will become more serious. Again, this takes place over time



and is very carefully thought out and executed.

Step 11: The Rumor Clinic

The rumor clinic completes the process that was started during the we/they step. In the we/they step the goal was to pull the victim from the peers. But this step is now designed to pull the peers away from the victim, thus, coming full circle.

A well-placed rumor can be devastating to anyone's reputation. This well-placed rumor will create doubt in the minds of everyone, even in the people who state their disbelief in the rumor. The disbelievers will still walk away with a gut feeling that there must be some truth to the rumor or it would not have been generated.

The inmates will start the rumor in such a way so as not to bring attention to them; usually starting the rumor in an area away from the victims work area will do this. This will lessen the chances of the rumor being associated to them and allow the rumor to gain strength. This will create a feeling of isolation in the victim and create a strengthening of the bond between the inmates and the victim.

Turnouts

Up until now the inmates have violated no laws and the rules infractions have been minor. The inmates have implemented the first 11 steps of the set-up process without being detected. Remember, this has been a period of many months. (The average is approximately 19 months.)

Before taking the next step the inmates must review whether or not the set-up has been properly administered. They need to be sure the victim being deceived can also be controlled. They cannot proceed without breaking the law and committing serious in-house violations.

The final three steps are very closely associated and intertwined. These steps are the point of no return for all involved. What has been perceived as being friendly, helpful, innocent, and trustworthy now becomes deadly serious.

Step 12: The Shopping List

Everything that has transpired has led to this point in the set-up. The inmates are going to make their demands and expose their true intentions. The shopping list is just that, a list of contraband items.

This list not only includes goods but could also encompass sexual favors. They have created a situation where refusal is difficult. The shopping list, besides letting the victim know what the inmates demands are, also lets the victim know he's been compromised. Backing out is never an option for the inmate.

Step 13: The Lever

A lever will pry, or force an object to respond through the proper distribution of pressure. If the turners have done the job properly, the right distribution of pressure has been applied and now they get their demands met. The lever is obtained at any point during the set-up process. The victim gave the inmates the lever they needed to proceed with the turnout.

Somewhere along the line there has been some type of indiscretion on the victim's behalf that the manipulator threatens to expose. This is a very dangerous time for the victim. The fun and games are over and if the victim does not submit to the inmate demands then he is at their mercy—and could pay with his life. Victims that submit to the demands are usually led to believe that this is a one-time request.

But it is rarely, if ever, a one-time request.

The victim will feel some release of pressure thinking that after the demands are met this time, things will return to normal and the indiscretion will be forgotten. This is not the case.

Step 14: The Sting

The sting wraps up all the steps in the set-up. The victim now has a choice to make: do as you are told or suffer the consequences. When the set-up reaches this point most employees comply with the demands of the inmates. Others will resign and some will risk the possibility of being harmed and expose the situation.

It is for the most part a lose/lose situation for the victim. Even if the victim succumbs to their demands it is not enough for the inmates to have turned the employee and reaped the rewards. The inmates themselves will, after using the victim, expose the employee's indiscretion to the authorities.

A set-up is a game. It is a game with a winner and a loser and it has rules and a strategic method. Can correctional staff be prepared for an inmate set-up? The answer is yes.

Avoidance, Protection

There are some tips you can follow to help be better prepared for an inmate set-up. They are as follows:

- Professionalism: respect your environment and never become unduly familiar with the inmates.

- Recognition Training: learn the techniques and methods used by inmate in the set-up process.

- Communication Monitoring: remember what you say and how you say it is constantly being monitored by the inmates.

- Information Gathering: this works both ways. Know the inmates that work for you and learn their behaviors.

- Procedural Knowledge: know the inmate rules and regulations as well as the employee rules and regulations.

- Confident Command: be firm, fair, consistent, and objective in your contact with inmates.

- Chain of Command: use your supervision of the inmates as a source of information and keep your chain of command informed of situations, questions, and problems.

- Documentation: this is your best form of protection. If it is not in writing then it did not happen. File reports and interdepartmental memos on incidents. Keep your notebook complete with information regarding times, dates, and names among other things.

- Learn the effective and appropriate use of the word 'no'.

- Crisis Judgement: protect yourself; report it; respond appropriately, using the minimum force necessary, communicate it; and, document, document, document!

Inmate set-ups are a serious problem that go on right under our noses. They involve peers, supervisors, and even administrators. If you see an employee heading down that path, stop them and report the actions of the inmates. Help each other to survive in this jungle we call our place of employment. Corrections professionals work in the inmate's living environment and we should never forget that! Take nothing for granted and respect that environment.

Author Jim Topham is a training coordinator at the Merrimac, NH, County Department of Corrections. He is a regularly-appearing contributor to CTM Magazine. Photos by Mark C. Ide.